

VZCZCXRO2855
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHSK #1123/01 2911144
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 181144Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5238
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 1310
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 001123

SIPDIS

SIPDIS
KYIV ALSO FOR USAID

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/18/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: "16" NOT SO SWEET: DAYS OF SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN
WANING, THOUGH USEFUL

REF: A. 05 MINSK 1419

- [1](#)B. MINSK 654
- [1](#)C. MINSK 739
- [1](#)D. MINSK 951

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) September 16, 2006 marked the first anniversary of the "Days of Solidarity" opposition campaign in Belarus. Planned as a series of monthly candle-lighting ceremonies on the 16th of each month honoring the memories of disappeared opponents of the Lukashenko regime, the campaign evolved into an opposition demonstration movement. However, a predictable schedule allowed GOB security services to obstruct events, and the major opposition parties provided little support. Nevertheless, the campaign has helped opposition forces expand and maintain contacts among lower-level pro-democracy youth activists during the otherwise politically inactive period immediately following the March presidential elections. End summary.

The Origins and Evolution of Solidarity

[1](#)2. (U) For the past year, opposition activists in Belarus have observed a "Day of Solidarity" on the 16th day of each month to commemorate the unexplained 1999 disappearances of opposition politician Viktor Gonchar and opposition activist and businessman Anatoliy Krasovskiy. Opposition youth activist Nikita Sasim, journalist Irina Khalip, and Irina Krasovskaya, the widow of Anatoliy Krasovskiy, began the Solidarity campaign on September 16, 2005, by encouraging friends and sympathizers of the disappeared to turn off the lights in their homes and place lit candles in their windows at 8 p.m. on the 16th day of each month. However, many sources related to Emboffs that participants would often position their lit candles out of public sight (ref A). Following the fraudulent March 19 Belarusian elections, the campaign evolved into a nationwide campaign of opposition demonstrations, primarily focused on Days of Solidarity street protests near the Russian Embassy in Minsk, and gradually attracted the involvement of several top opposition party leaders. Press reports indicated that dozens of supporters of the movement lit candles outside the Russian and Belarusian embassies in nearby countries. Some of the widows of the disappeared remain strong supporters of the campaign, which uses stickers, clothing, and graffiti with the staple figure "16."

The GOB Shoots Fish in a Barrel

13. (C) During April and May, Solidarity's turn out was relatively impressive, between 70 and 100 protesters, and unfettered by GOB security services. However, by early summer, the GOB ratcheted up both its presence and tactics outside the Russian Embassy and, in so doing, revealed the first weakness of Days of Solidarity as a post-election opposition demonstration movement, i.e. its strategy of staging anti-GOB demonstrations each month at the same time and same place. Despite pro-opposition media's reporting that the June 16 demonstration included as many as 100 activists who stood in line and lit candles outside the Russian Embassy, human rights lawyer Ales Kalyeta later related to Poloff that police prevented the event from taking place by detaining 30 activists before they reached the Russian Embassy and by immediately arresting the 20 that were able to congregate near the embassy. Several activists were beaten, including one young activist, Lyubov Kuchinskaya, who was hospitalized for serious injuries (ref B).

14. (SBU) The GOB crackdown continued during the July 16 demonstration, which coincided with the G-8 Summit in St. Petersburg. GOB security forces deployed heavy trucks, two 40-person buses, and several jeeps filled with OMON riot police. On the street corners two hundred meters away from the adjacent Russian and American Embassies, two-man police teams dressed in jeans jackets and pants patrolled on foot and seized anyone who appeared to be a possible protestor before reaching the Russian Embassy. After each capture, police radioed to the pre-positioned jeeps, which picked up those detained and sped away. Poloff observed Belarusian

MINSK 00001123 002 OF 003

police detain as many as 40 people near the Russian Embassy, including senior opposition coalition member and United Civic Party (UCP) leader Anatoliy Lebedko. Although Poloff witnessed police use excessive force against many of the protestors, Poloff did not observe force used against Lebedko. Meanwhile, authorities in the western cities of Brest and Grodno detained eight candle-bearing activists. All July 16 detainees except Lebedko and another UCP activist, Evgeniy Askerko, were released without charge (ref C).

15. (SBU) By the end of summer, Solidarity's light seemed to fade. On the evening of August 16, Poloff patrolled the vicinity of the Russian Embassy in Minsk, adjacent to the U.S. Embassy, for almost two hours. During that time, no opposition demonstrators appeared. The GOB security services' presence was lighter than the previous month but still included at least two jeeps and one bus filled with 40 riot policemen who never left their vehicle. The following day, independent media reported the brief detention of 10 youth activists in the eastern city of Gomel but none in Minsk. (Note: On August 4, several Solidarity activists outside the Minsk courthouse during the trial of independent NGO "Partnership" leaders told Poloff that a major demonstration on the 16th was unlikely because most student activists would be on vacation.) The only notable event, besides the Gomel candle-lighting ceremony, was a visit by Lebedko and UCP Deputy Lyudmila Gryaznova with political prisoner Andrey Klimov, who was sentenced to two years of restricted freedom in March 2005.

Opposition Parties Show Mixed Support for Movement

16. (C) During the summer of 2006, Solidarity revealed its second handicap as an opposition demonstration movement. With the exception of Lebedko, no major opposition party leaders consistently participated in high-profile candle-lighting protests. This apparent lack of interest

spanned the ranks of opposition parties. For example, UCP youth-wing leader Kiril Ignatik told Poloff on September 29 that, despite Lebedko's involvement, he did not encourage his organization's members to participate in any of the Days of Solidarity demonstrations and believed that the movement would have no long lasting effect on the political culture of Belarus. Gryaznova recently told Pol/Econ Chief that she and others did not participate in Solidarity events because they were primarily organized "for the youth."

¶7. (C) Youth activists associated with the Days of Solidarity movement staged a GOB-sanctioned demonstration and concert called "Jeans Fest for Freedom" at Minsk's People's Friendship Park (ref C). Solidarity organizers had high hopes for robust participation and support from Belarusian activists. Among the principal organizers was opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) party Deputy Chair Viktor Ivashkevich, who helped recruit the list of high-file speakers that included Lebedko, former opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich, and BPF Chair Vintsuk Vyachorka. Moreover, Jeans Fest organizer and Zubr youth NGO leader Aleksandr Atroshchenkov told Poloffs on August 29 that Zubr had sent out nearly 60,000 SMS messages to Solidarity activists and sympathizers and predicted as many as 10,000 from throughout Belarus would participate in the Jeans Fest. (Note: On September 13, Poloff spoke with Andrey Barbitsky, a youth activist in the northeastern city of Borisov, who revealed to Poloff that he

and about a dozen activists from the opposition "Za Svobodu" movement would travel to Minsk to participate in the Jeans Fest.)

¶8. (C) In contrast to Atroshchenkov's upbeat prediction, approximately 2,500 actually participated in the Jeans Fest and, due to an unexplained power outage in the park during the event's second half, were left walking home in the dark (ref D). Furthermore, both Ivashkevich and Milinkevich had earlier related to us that they expected September 16 to be the last Day of Solidarity. On October 4, independent media quoted Milinkevich as warning supporters that mass street protests should not exceed one every three months because of possible "degradation" of opposition resources.

But Solidarity Maintains Some Momentum

¶9. (C) Although Days of Solidarity may not have the full backing of the opposition elite, there are those who still

MINSK 00001123 003 OF 003

want to continue the movement. On October 16, authorities in Minsk detained 15 activists as they held images of Belarusian political prisoners and the disappeared and attempted to place lit candles at the memorial to victims of a 1999 stampede that killed 54 people at a Minsk subway station. Meanwhile, authorities in Brest took 14 activists into custody for participating in a demonstration in which 25 people with large letters on their chests arranged themselves on a bridge so that the letters would read "Freedom to Political Prisoners!" Authorities released all detainees without charge after recording their passport information. Atroshchenkov noted to Poloff in August that Zubr activists were already developing their plans for a large Solidarity demonstration in November.

Solidarity's Contribution to the Struggle for Change

¶10. (C) Despite Solidarity's apparent disappointments, the campaign has benefited the Belarusian opposition in two concrete ways. First, those who participated became points of contact between grassroots cells of rival opposition youth organizations. In many cases, such points of contact acted as conduits for information exchange and cross-organizational recruitment. On September 27, Sergey Semenyuk, Deputy Chair of the newly formed BPF youth-wing "BPF Moladz," commented to

Poloff that, while the long-term influence of the Solidarity campaign remains unknown, the contacts established among youth organizations through Solidarity would likely remain the campaign's most profound legacy. Similarly, UCP youth cell leader Vitaliy Storozhov and two associates recounted to Poloff on September 1 how they had been activists in the opposition youth organization "Malady Front" but had recently joined UCP because of contacts made at a post-election Solidarity event. Poloff later spoke with Storozhov at the Jeans Fes t. He and his associates were wearing "Za Svobodu" T-shirts, UCP and Solidarity "16" buttons, and Malady Front bandanas.

¶11. (C) Second, although the Solidarity protests have been relatively small, they represent the largest continuous protest effort since the elections and have inspired spin off movements in other areas of society, including the Belarusian Free Theater, whose members recently told Charge their plans to stage productions to commemorate the disappearances on the 16th. Malady Front leader Sergey Bakhun recently observed, "Many people criticize Solidarity for being too small and using overly symbolic and predictable tactics. Most of these people were doing nothing even as they criticized the campaign. I think the Solidarity movement had an enormous influence on the Belarusian youth consciousness. Every time I see a '16,' I think to myself, 'At least somebody was doing something.'"

Comment

¶12. (C) The true breadth and depth of the influence of Days of Solidarity is difficult to quantify in the absence of scientific polling data. (Note: Post has asked two prominent independent pollsters in Belarus to gauge public opinion on the movement. End note.) However, it is safe to say that the campaign, though small, has expanded and maintained relationships among lower-level pro-democracy youth activists during the opposition's otherwise inactive period immediately following March's presidential elections. These relationships should serve the opposition well during local elections scheduled for January 14.
Moore